

Metro pond hockey tourney attracts 45 teams

Eastern Canadian Championships take place at Centennial Park Friday through Sunday

They'll come from near and they'll come from far; they will be the young and young-at-heart.

Above all else, while they'll come from different backgrounds and hometowns, all the players at this weekend's Eastern Canadian Pond Hockey Championships at Centennial Park will come with a love for the game of hockey.

While the majority of the 45 teams are from the local area, for some clubs the tournament will be a good opportunity for a weekend away.

"It's not too far," said Mike McCallum, 30, of the nearly two-hour drive his Truro, Nova Scotia-based team will embark on to arrive at the tournament. "If it was six hours, or 10 hours, we'd still go. We'd jump in the van and away we'd go; that's part of the fun of the road trip. It's just like four little kids when we jump in that van in the morning to take off . . . It brings back that little edge, that little sparkle. We get out on the ice and we're going to go at it."

Mike's team, Salmon River Hockeyville, was the first to register for the tournament -- which begins tomorrow and runs through Sunday -- and is one of the clubs that will travel the farthest to be at the tournament.

Darren Hansen, president of the Moncton West & Riverview Rotary Club, which is organizing the event, says most of the teams in this year's tournaments are local, but there are teams coming from throughout Nova Scotia, as well as throughout New Brunswick.

"We want this to be a true Eastern Canadian Championship and we want to get participation from all the Atlantic provinces," Darren said, noting a team from Newfoundland was originally scheduled to attend but had to cancel and plan to come next year instead. "The word is getting out; people are hearing about it."

With 205 players on 45 teams, the event has grown significantly from last year where there were 120 players on 30 teams. With Source for Sports as a title sponsor for the event, Hansen believes promotion across the Atlantic provinces will become easier as they look to expand the tournament throughout the Maritimes.

Teams will compete in open, over 35 and corporate divisions, with players ranging from 18 years old to those who are over 50.

Blain Adams, 57, has the distinction of being the oldest competitor at this weekend's tournament. Adams will compete with his team Red Ball Internet Surfers in the corporate division and he's looking forward to the weekend.

"I've been playing hockey my whole life, I still play and I've played lots of tournaments over the years," he said. "The pond hockey, as compared to the tournaments I've been playing, is much more fun... than the organized old timers tournaments."

Blain, who currently lives in Quispamsis, plays hockey three times a week with a wide variety of age groups, from people in their 20s to people over 50. He isn't worried about being a step behind the competition at this weekend's tournament.

"As far as being able to play with those people, it's not really a problem to play with them. You just have to realize what stage you're at to play with them.

"I actually like playing with younger people that move the puck well," he said. "I really don't let age play a factor in where I play."

While he admits this weekend's tournament is more of a team-building exercise for his company than a serious win-at-all-costs effort, Blain says if he can be an inspiration to some of the younger players, he will relish the role.

"There are a lot of people who will comment on the fact that 'you're still playing, at your age,' type of thing. I still get that quite often," he said. "It's good, I don't do it for that reason, I do it because I enjoy it, but it's always nice to hear, especially when it's in a positive fashion."

Jeff Stewart, 33, whose Pro Data Ice Dogs team from Fredericton will compete in the open division, says, regardless of skill level, the tournament is certain to be a memorable event.

"That's one of the biggest things -- the weekend away. It's not so much about the winning as it is about getting together with buddies and heading away for a road trip and enjoying some pond hockey," he said.

"It's hard to get people together to play pond hockey nowadays so it's nice to have an organized event to do that at."